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ABSTRACT

Discipline alone is not enough to make a school a better teaching and learning environment. Like punishment, discipline applied as control can cause more difficulties than it remedies; continual emphasis on discipline with constant surveillance by the teacher for infractions may produce more problems than it solves. By clearly connecting learning to discipline for students, the teacher demonstrates that the goal has required behavior. This helps students to understand that what they need and want is directly related to how they act. This understanding is essential for effective discipline and student self control. When practiced as such, students are no longer cast into a position of submissive obedience. Instead, they can see themselves as acting responsibly toward desired goals. With this approach, the emphasis is on learning and teaching with discipline playing an important but subordinate role. Research findings indicate that classroom organization and management, as part of instruction, are key processes in establishing and maintaining an effective and disciplined learning environment. Effective school and teacher characteristics which reinforce a positive learning environment are cited. (JD)

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## DISCIPLINE: THE GREAT FALSE HOPE

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As an issue, discipline has become omnipotent. Strengthening itself on the fear of teachers and parents, rising rates of juvenile delinquency, and a seemingly endless stream of tales of strife in urban schools, it dominates the national awareness of public education in this country. Again, for the twelfth time in the last thirteen years, lack of discipline has been reported by the Gallup Poll as being regarded as the number one problem facing public schools.<sup>1</sup>

Good discipline. Better discipline. Any discipline. We need discipline. You can hear the chant.

Discipline's attraction for the front line teacher and principal is magnetic. In the last five years, two of the most well attended workshops and in-service offerings at the local, state and national levels for educators have been the discipline and stress programs. And what is thought to be the primary cause of teacher stress? Discipline problems, of course. In that same amount of time over twenty books on teaching and discipline have been published. In addition, innumerable kits, tapes, films, and multi-media packages focusing on discipline have marketed their way into the educational establishment. Any general catalogue of educational materials will easily attest to this.

Are we obsessed with discipline? It seems we are. We persistently ruminate and hope for an end to our difficulties believing that better

discipline is the answer. If anything could ever have been made real by wishing for it or wanting it, we would have made disciplined students the norm long ago. Yet, discipline itself does not end discipline problems. In fact, the hard evidence says discipline strikes out as a concept and as a cure.

#### DISCIPLINE AS A CONCEPT

Discipline, as a word, lacks clear meaning. Most dictionaries have multiple definitions for it, and so do most people. For some, discipline is synonymous with punishment while for others it means self-direction and orderly conduct. Two adults observing a particularly obstreperous boy might remark and seemingly agree, "That child really needs some discipline." However, it is quite possible that one of these persons is proposing a spanking and the other is suggesting what amounts to a brief counseling session. In the educational domain the concept of discipline may mean to some teachers what one does to prevent misbehavior and to another group of teachers how to specifically deal with misbehavior after it has occurred. At best, discipline is an ambiguous word, and, unless those who use it are quite clear in mutually understanding its meaning, any cooperative effort to arrive at its related goals may be limited and very frustrating. The vagueness of discipline has bogged down many a teaching staff and building principal in a mire of mistrust and unfortunate fragmentation.

In schools, the most widely accepted and practiced interpretation of the word discipline is control--student acceptance of or submission to teacher authority. Obedience. This orientation sanctions the

educators' right and obligation to unilateral control of students. In a popular sense, when schools are criticized for a lack of discipline they are being criticized for a lack of control over their students. But for teachers and parents to publicly admit this perspective is another matter. Discipline as control sounds oppressive, dismal and, at best, shortsighted. So we often alter our description of what we desperately want and work to achieve with the more palatable meanings of discipline. Obedience becomes responsibility and the press for control filters out into a plea for orderliness and self-direction. Whether this is confusion, hypocrisy, self-deception or a game we play to maintain more noble aspirations for our schools and children is a moot issue. The research continues to indicate that practicing teachers take the control interpretation of discipline to heart.

For more than a half-century, surveys have found discipline to be the primary concern of prospective and beginning teachers. The neophyte teacher is in an especially vulnerable position. Not only is this person in a new job with immediate role expectations and lack of tenure, this individual must also face for the first time, more directly than ever before, his or her ability to conduct and maintain a cooperative and orderly group of students for the purpose of learning something. Unlike student teaching, there is no supervising teacher to fall back upon and like any chosen baptism, there is only the self to receive and interpret the consequences of one's behavior. This is indeed a critical period for the formation of attitudes and habits.

In 1968, Wayne Hoy investigated the influence of experience on the beginning teacher relative to discipline.<sup>2</sup> Using an attitudinal

measure and 155 participants, he found that after each successive period of teaching (student teaching and one year of regular teaching) both elementary and secondary teachers became increasingly more "custodial"--stressing a maintenance of order, distrust of students, and a punitive, moralistic orientation toward pupil control. For the 39 teachers in this group who did not teach the year subsequent to graduation, there was virtually no change of attitude toward discipline one year after student teaching. Thus, at least initially, there appears to be a cumulative effect--more teaching experience leads to a stronger control orientation on the part of teachers. It is also interesting to note that Hoy found that 69% of the first year teachers agreed with the statement, "Teacher education programs tend to focus on ideal images and situations rather than the harsh realities of teaching," and 83% of the same group also agreed with another revealing statement, "In the school in which I am teaching, good teaching and good classroom control tend to be equated."

It takes little insight to see that colleges of education, by not adequately preparing teacher trainees for the demands and difficulties of working with students, make these new teachers more susceptible to a reactionary response toward students and more vulnerable to the influences of those educators who uphold control as a necessity for survival and effective teaching. Thus, there is little chance that new teachers with ideal but untested and unstable ideas about discipline can shift the direction from the status quo. The history of discipline as control is bound to repeat itself, especially if we consider that

this functional interpretation of discipline has a strong foundation in both reality and social inheritance.

The American school system was founded on an authoritarian model and every teacher is influenced by this legacy.<sup>3</sup> More important, public schools are institutions that deal with large numbers of students and some control is necessary for effective learning to occur. Elementary school teachers individually work with an average of 30 students up to seven hours each day. Secondary school teachers meet with 30+ students per class session who change rooms approximately five to seven times a day. With these kinds of teacher-to-student ratios, it is obvious that to cover the necessary curriculum in the allotted time and space rules and order must be maintained. Moreover, a significant number of students are in school on an involuntary basis and may not be committed to school goals and procedures. Some control of students by teachers makes necessary routines more viable and does help to maintain the psychological well-being of these educators who daily face a myriad of demands in such a situation.

There is no doubt that student acceptance of teacher authority is necessary for a school to function. However, the range of student acceptance and the imposition of teacher authority varies dynamically according to the demands of the situation at hand and the goals of the teacher in charge. It is important that a teacher command and expect student obedience in the case of an emergency such as a building fire or a student conflict involving a weapon, because the immediate safety of students has been endangered. In everyday learning activities it is just as reasonable for a teacher to request and expect responsible

involvement and self-directed study on the part of students because facilitating a desire to learn and continuing to learn beyond the boundaries of school are primary goals of teachers for their students. For a teacher to want students to learn simply as an obedient response to his or her authority seems, at best, self-defeating to the fundamental goals of education. The problem with discipline, as a word, is that it does not make these distinctions. Furthermore, because it so often in practice is equated with control it blurs and diffuses our attention away from what we can do to help students to want to learn and increases our focus on what we can do to make them learn.

#### DISCIPLINE AS A CURE

If the criteria of 1) improved student achievement; 2) improved student attitude toward school; and 3) improved teacher attitude toward students are applied (and it seems they must be), there is no research which shows that better discipline, by any definition, as a singular approach has made even one school in this country more effective. Astonishing? No, both logically and empirically, discipline alone is not enough to make a school a better teaching and learning environment.

Because discipline is so often applied as control, it comes across to the student as a form of direct or implied threat. We essentially say to the student, "If you don't do what I think is best for you to do, I am going to make life in this classroom more difficult for you." This may mean lower grades, extra academic work, staying after school, loss of privileges, public embarrassment, or calling the student's parents. Sometimes this does work with some students and we are

reinforced. It is important to note that this variable and somewhat unpredictable rate of reinforcement is one of the most powerful means of maintaining a specific behavior. However, threat leaves an emotional side effect--resentment. To realize this we simply have to ask ourselves when was the last time someone made us do something we didn't want to do, even if it were for "the good of the cause." Maybe it was a principal or a spouse. Maybe it was a police officer, or perhaps, an Internal Revenue Service agent. How did we feel toward that person? Students feel the same way. That makes them more hostile, sometimes aggressive, and often, passive aggressive. We get the work, but it's late, sloppily done, or incomplete. Students slam books, bang doors, and give us dirty looks. The classroom is filled with tension and an abrasive, conflicted relationship between ourselves and our students is gaining steam. We feel more frustrated and, therefore, more likely to threaten them. The cycle is complete and spinning. It can happen fast. In this way we can lose a student, a class, a semester--a career. Burn up precedes burn out.

Like punishment, discipline applied as control can cause more difficulties than it remedies. There is evidence that a continual emphasis on discipline with a constant surveillance by the teacher for disciplinary infractions may produce more problems than it solves. Michael Rutter reports in his classic study of secondary schools and their effects on children, Fifteen Thousand Hours, that frequent disciplinary interventions were linked with more disruptive behavior in the classroom.<sup>4</sup> His analysis of this phenomenon was that there were three different mechanisms that could contribute to its occurrence. First,

if the goal of the student's misbehavior is attention, a reprimand, especially a loud one, may be just what the child wants. Secondly, disciplinary action may stop the misbehavior of one disruptive student, but it also often interrupts the learning activities of all the other students. Thirdly, the negative atmosphere of tension and resentment created by constant nagging and reprimands may actually provoke and perpetuate disruptive behavior.

#### WHY DISCIPLINE ALONE DOES NOT WORK

Beyond the reality that discipline is an ambiguous concept that most often translates into teacher control of students, discipline alone does not work because it is deficient as a process to accomplish what schools really have to be about.

Like a conductor who doesn't care how the music sounds so long as the orchestra sits up straight and starts and stops together, discipline alone seems limited and vacuous. Discipline does not make a better curriculum. Discipline does not mean effective instruction. Discipline does not motivate students. Discipline has to be part of and inseparable from something larger and more important than itself. Learning. Integrally combined with effective teaching, sound curriculum, and competent administrative leadership, it is a force for learning. Alone and as a primary focus for a teacher or a school, it may actually be a force against learning.

As an end in itself, discipline for its own sake creates an artificial distinction in the minds of teachers and students. It tells students to obey and be controlled because of the commands and admonitions of a more powerful authority, the teacher. Such a distinction

separates discipline in schools from its educational purpose which is to facilitate effective learning. Appropriate behavior is necessary for learning to occur and unless students understand that misbehavior limits their own learning as well as the learning of others, discipline can degenerate into a willful power struggle between teacher and student. By clearly connecting learning to discipline for students, the teacher demonstrates that the goal sought has required behavior. This helps students to understand that what they need and want is directly related to how they act. This understanding is essential for effective discipline and student self-control. When practiced as such, students are no longer cast into a position of submissive obedience. Instead, they can see themselves as acting responsibly toward desired goals with consequent feelings of positive self-esteem. With this approach, the emphasis is on learning and teaching with discipline playing an important but subordinate role.

#### WHEN DISCIPLINE DOES HELP--IT ISN'T DISCIPLINE

When discipline does work, it usually loses its name. Jere Brophy at the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University doesn't like the term discipline. "Discipline is a word filled with negative connotations. It's often misleading and probably has been oversold to teachers and schools. I prefer using the words classroom organization and management to discipline. They're part of instruction and that's what seems to really help to set up an effective learning environment. When schools and teachers concentrate on learning and improving instruction, they seem to have a better chance to achieve

those goals, but when they concentrate on discipline, they just don't seem to get that far."

The findings of other eminent researchers who've taken a close, hard and long look at teaching and student behavior support Brophy's contention that classroom organization and management as part of instruction are key processes in establishing and maintaining an effective learning environment. The following list of generalizations are mutually supported by the research studies of Linda Anderson, Carolyn Evertson,<sup>5</sup> Jacob Kounin<sup>6</sup>, Michael Rutter<sup>7</sup> and Jere Brophy.<sup>8</sup>

1. Classroom organization and management skills are intimately related to instruction skills. Effective teachers tend to be good managers.
2. Students like teachers whom they perceive as good at managing the class (getting students settled, working and behaving) as well as good at teaching (making the subject clear and interesting).
3. Effective teachers view order as part of the instructional process.
4. Effective teachers tend to deal with misbehavior in terms of the goals and requirements of the lesson at hand. Their reactions to misbehavior tend to be task-focused rather than person-focused. "Nathan if you don't listen, you won't understand the assignment." Not--"Nathan you're acting badly again."
5. Effective teachers are prepared to teach. They know what they are doing and what they will be doing next.

6. Effective teachers keep students actively engaged in productive activities rather than waiting for something to happen. Smooth transitions from one activity to the next are characteristic of their teaching.
7. Effective teachers tend to keep children involved and interested and to be aware of what is going on in all parts of the classroom.
8. Effective teachers tend to spot disruptive behavior early and deal with it appropriately and firmly with a minimum of interference with the lesson.
9. Any disciplinary style which involves very frequent interventions is likely to be counterproductive.

Discipline, by its own name or any other title, lacks any wide based research support as an effective process for the improvement of student learning as well as behavior. When discipline is referred to as discipline, and considered helpful in the improvement of any school, it is clearly part of a much bigger picture. At best it is a strong current in a much larger stream of effective administrative leadership, competent teachers, sound curriculum and instruction, and supportive parental involvement. The Phi Delta Kappa Study of Exceptional Urban Elementary Schools gives strong testimony and support to this reality.<sup>9</sup> In this comprehensive analysis of effective urban schools which includes case studies, research and expert opinion, discipline is noticeable by its absence from any of the twelve generalizations that this report "confidently" offers as a realistic assessment of what is currently known about the determinants of urban school improvement. When

discipline problems are discussed in this study, it is clear that what resolves these issues is far beyond the scope of any given discipline solution or technique. In fact, no single discipline approach is advocated. The primary quality that all discipline approaches discussed in this study share is that they are interwoven with the following school and teacher characteristics for their effectiveness:

1. The building principal is crucial as a motivator and support for improvement. This person models positive expectations, cooperates with teachers, and is a prominent participant within the school. EXAMPLE: In each case study, the principal was always visible in the halls, classrooms, multipurpose rooms and cafeteria.
2. Every case study stressed that a school must have a discipline policy that includes student self-discipline. EXAMPLE: At Washington Park School in Cincinnati, there is no list of rules and regulations. However, at the beginning of each school day students, teachers, parents and administrators recite together three expectations: 1) Come to school every day and every day on time; 2) Bring my tools and my manners; and 3) Do the very best work I can.
3. These schools are characterized by clearly stated curriculum goals and objectives. They publicize a well-defined mission that is understood by teachers, students and parents. EXAMPLE: At Leif Ericson School in Chicago the instructional goal is for all children to learn to read at grade level upon graduation. Not only did the teacher's union accept the mastery

program that supports this goal and demands considerable extra work on the part of the teachers, parents also attend individual pupil progress reviews at a 99% rate of cooperation.

4. In these schools teachers are committed, cooperative, have high expectations for students and are willing to work with parents. EXAMPLE: At snow time, teachers set up telephone trees to get out assignments, so students would not fall behind.
5. Each case study stressed parent involvement as an important factor. EXAMPLE: A wide variety ranging from parents volunteering to coach, tutor, or teach on in-service days, to parents conducting talent shows and serving on advisory committees.

#### MOTIVATION BEFORE DISCIPLINE

Another reason why discipline is so ineffective as a singular process for the improvement of student behavior and learning is because it does so very little about what may be the largest antecedent of classroom misbehavior--boredom. Every teacher knows that motivated students cause less behavior problems and that motivated students are much easier to help when misbehavior occurs. Motivated students are usually not bored students. Boredom is a motivational issue. Discipline just does not do the trick. Recent surveys indicate that teachers are painfully aware of this as well. In Los Angeles, Joyce King-Stoops and Wanda Meier found teachers themselves identifying failure to motivate as their number one problem in discipline and control.<sup>10</sup> Henry Lufler, Jr.'s preliminary findings from a two-year study in Wisconsin indicate that 58% of the teachers surveyed thought that boring classes were an important contributing factor to disciplinary problems.<sup>11</sup>

Like bullets in a campfire, bored students in a classroom are an unpredictable explosive threat to order and learning. William Glasser says, "People keep order either from fear or because they have a stake in the situation."<sup>12</sup> Motivation to learn is the student's stake in a classroom situation. When students experience teaching as something that helps them to learn things which interest and stimulate them, they actually do see it as irrational to disrupt or abuse the situation. However, when bored, students have little vested interest in the learning process and are more likely to feel frustrated and to act irresponsibly. There is no doubt that misbehavior often ends boredom. For the student, disruption may be the easiest escape from an already aversive situation. Furthermore, influence or management techniques with bored students just do not have the impact or leverage they have with motivated students. A classroom of bored students is an environment vulnerable to constant teacher nagging and reprimanding because there is little else to keep the students involved in the learning task. In such a situation, a well worn cliche comes back to haunt the harried teacher--self-control emanates from self-interest. There is a double loss here as well. Not only are students bored and probably not learning, but the teacher receives little reward back from the students in terms of attention, enthusiasm or appreciation. Under these circumstances, it will not be long before another predator in today's schools makes its inevitable appearance--teacher stress.

It is no wonder then that instruction and curriculum play such a large part in the improvement of student behavior and learning. Student motivation is largely an instructional question; how to keep students

interested; how to help them find learning rewarding. Motivation to learn is probably the foundation for effective teacher influence techniques and when instruction improves so does student motivation and the teacher's impact as a manager. Good teaching and sound curriculum provide the necessary context for student self-control and orderly conduct. Discipline, by any name, has a lifeline attached to instruction.

Discipline in schools has enjoyed a lengthy and powerful reign as the dominant concern of teachers and the American public. But it is a term badly in need of redefinition and a process subordinate to and dependent upon other fundamental aspects of learning and teaching. Discipline misleads. Discipline alone does not pay off. More charlatan than savior, it saps our energy and our resources. Yet, we still want order in our classrooms and safety for our children. These are necessary and realistic goals. Schools and teachers do achieve them. Looking at these teachers and schools makes one thing very clear--they have reached beyond the great false hope of discipline.

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